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ABSTRACT

This article describes an unusual program that has been developed without the use of federal funds, a new high school English curriculum that is in its third year of operation. In all, 50 courses are offered for students' pre-registration. Each student chooses six nine-week, one-quarter credit courses. He is assured of being enrolled in a minimum of four of the courses. This policy has encouraged an exodus from study halls to English classes and also permits students deficient in credits to make up for lost time. In answer to the students' complaint that having the same class all year was unendurable, teachers recommended that all elective courses should be offered on a nine-week basis. To convince students that language arts really had a "new look," creative titles were given to each of the courses. The Madison program offers the advantages of nongraded and multi-age grouping. Students have the opportunity to judge their own ability to enroll in courses in which they believe they are capable of achieving. Increased enrollment, positive attitudes, grade improvement, and additional courses indicate the success of the Elective English program. Other advantages of this program are: (1) It is student centered and of interest to students; (2) It allows for individual differences; (3) It permits teachers to be a responsible force in the construction and implementation of the project. (CK)

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HOOKED ON ENGLISH
TEACHER-INITIATED, INTEREST-ORIENTED, NONGRADED, STUDENT ELECTIVE, STUDENT ACCEPTANCE, CURRICULAR HANG-UPS

by Susan Taylor and Howard Henderson

Paraphrasing the *Hooked On Books* title of Fader and McNeil's[1] exciting description of one approach to reading, "Hooked on English" is one approach to the teaching of language arts. The title of this article, together with the "mod" innovative terms noted above, is represented in a new high school English curriculum currently in its third year of operation at the twelve hundred and eighty-six student Madison Senior High School in the Madison Local School District of Mansfield, Ohio.

The program is somewhat unusual in that it has been developed without the assistance of Federal funds, namely Title III-E.S.E.A., which has funded many innovative curricular development projects throughout the nation. The program is the result of many hours of planning and writing on behalf of the Madison English staff, the cooperation of the school administration, and the support of the local board of education. The board has encouraged teacher-directed and implemented curricular revision in all departments. Outside influence on the development of the Madison program has been limited. During the initial year of the program, periodic conferences with Vern Wootton English consultant, State Department of Education, have been held and communication with various other innovative English projects throughout the nation has been established.

The usual amount of audio-visual equipment found in most high schools has received heavy use in the program, particularly the video tape recorder in such courses as Mythology, Contemporary Literature, and Radio and T.V. Broadcasting.

Fifty courses in all are offered for students' pre-registration. Each student chooses six nine-week, one-quarter credit courses. He is assured of being enrolled in a minimum of four of the courses. By enrolling in two nine-week courses during the same quarter, a student may earn one-half credit for that particular nine-week period. This policy has encouraged an exodus from study halls to English classes and also permits students deficient in

[1]Daniel Fader and Elton McNeil, *Hooked on Books: Program and Proof;* New York, Berkley Books, 1968.

English credits to make up the credit without enrolling for summer school or possibly an additional school year.

Teacher-Initiated

"English is such a drag!" "Who needs it?" "We study the same things each year." "Same class, same teacher all year — too boring!" Madison students readily confronted their English teachers with these remarks. As the frequency of the comments increased, Madison High School's ten English teachers began searching for valid responses. Was their English program relevant? Could they continue to justify teaching their classes as they previously had taught them? Teachers and students were demanding answers. Absence of articulation, and of a consistent philosophy and objectives, plus the repetition of materials, disinterested students and unused teacher talent contributed to the language arts dilemma. The plight of Madison teachers and students was by no means unique.

The English staff accepted the challenge of curriculum revision — to develop a relevant course of study designed to meet the individual needs and interests of their students. An effective language arts program must utilize the talents of its teachers. Previously teachers, required to present subject matter in which possibly they were unprepared or uninterested, were logically unable to motivate many of their students. The curriculum based generally upon the teaching of American literature and traditional grammar could no longer be justified. During "brainstorming" sessions, "new" areas of literature and composition study were introduced. A Laugh or Two with Will, America's Claim to Fame — The Short Story, Rite it Rite, and The American Spirit Comes of Age are but a few.

In answer to the student's complaint that having the same class all year was unendurable, teachers recommended that elective courses should be offered on a nine-week basis. Nine weeks was considered to be adequate for study of the various courses and brief enough to keep the student's interest. Unlike a twelve or eighteen-week program, it would increase the student's opportunity to develop his individual program of studies. Following the premise that if given the opportunity students would select the courses which they needed, the language arts staff recommended that students not be required to complete any particular course — only that they successfully complete a total of eight nine-week elective courses.

In March 1968, the pilot program was initiated. Five teachers who taught class during a common period offered five different courses — Mass Media, Contemporary Literature, Look That Up, So You're Going to Apply for a Job, and Image Around the World — to their students. For six weeks students in grades ten, eleven, and twelve were free to follow their personal interests in enrolling in an English course. Imagine having a choice in English! Many students also had the opportunity to work with a different teacher for six weeks. Results were quite positive — students' and teachers' enthusiasm was high. The decision to expand the elective program for the 1969-70 school year was an obvious result of the successful pilot program. The ever-increasing list of courses (then numbering forty-six), including topics suggested by students and teachers, was reviewed and course descriptions were formulated. To convince students that language arts really had a "new look," creative titles such as Old Uncle Sam Is Born, and America's Stormy Teens were given to each of the courses. These unique titles caused teachers and students to become engrossed in language arts pre-registration. The excitement with which students selected their English courses further motivated the teachers in developing the program.

Interest-Oriented

Science Fiction — What's This World Coming to?, Man Against the World, Ideas That Have Built Our World — Gimmicks as course titles in English? Very definitely, but not without reason. Fundamentals of English can be taught much easier when materials that are of interest to students are used. The interest-oriented

course is one of the chief advantages of the Madison program. Interest and motivation are essential for any successful program of studies. Jerome Kagan of Harvard University asserts, "Children can identify their own motives for a choice if they have the freedom to choose. If a child is not offered a choice, he does not have personal motivation for success."[2] Traditional English areas such as short story, grammar, composition, and reading suddenly become more attractive when taught through the use of current student-selected topics. Assurance of covering the basic facets of English has been a major concern of the language arts staff in planning the elective courses. Attempts have been made to include activities for written and oral communication in every course. Of course, the availability of topical material is a necessity when using the interest approach. Paperback books in great numbers and in a wide variety of interest areas are being used at Madison. Most of the books are purchased by students, yet eighty-one percent of the students spent less than three dollars for English materials during the school year. In the first year of the program, the journalism classes sponsored a paperback book exchange but discontinued the project after one year because most of the students apparently wanted to keep their own books even after the course was finished.

Pre-registration of all students enrolling for English is of great value in an interest-oriented curriculum. Prior to the regular spring registration of each student, the preregistration is conducted through the English classes by the English staff. Individual courses are discussed, including English concepts to be learned, activities to be conducted, and materials to be used. Students then identify courses in which they wish to enroll for the new school year with the assurance that they will be enrolled in four of the six courses for which they register at a later date. The final decision as to which of the possible courses will be offered each year rests with the students, thereby instilling within students the belief that this truly is their English program. In addition to assisting students in making better choices during registration, the pre-registration also is of value to the teaching staff. The staff is aware of the number of sections of various courses to be scheduled for the new year and is also aware of students' concerns about the courses. With the variety of courses being offered teachers are at last free to teach subjects which definitely appeal to them. As the Madison program has developed to better meet the students' needs, new courses are being added and other courses revised on a fairly continuous basis.

[2]Jerome Kagan, "Kids," Title 1 Conference, September 1970, Columbus, Ohio.

Nongraded

The Madison program offers the advantages of nongraded and multi-age grouping. This grouping offers a realistic, personal situation that encourages students to mix within different social groups, meeting new friends of various ages and backgrounds. Hopefully, this practice builds self-confidence in meeting new friends and in developing positive social attitudes. This type of grouping is much more comparable to everyday life than the year long structure practiced in most traditional English programs.

Students have the opportunity to judge their own ability and to enroll in courses in which they believe that they are capable of achieving. Courses are listed in the student handbook on four specific levels. "G", or General, are designed for students who have difficulty with English; examples of these courses are How to Study, Read and Enjoy It, and On the Job. "G" level or General courses are those courses designed for general interest and are open to all students. Examples of available courses are Contemporary Drama, Semantics, and Folklore. "A" or Advanced level courses are open to those students who have demonstrated some proficiency in the particular field. Examples of course offerings include Mythology, The Tragic Bard, and Oh! No, Not Another Research Paper. "C" or College level course are designed to provide background for the college-bound

students although all students may enroll in these courses. Example of "C" courses include College Prep., Speed (Reading), and Senior Study Seminar.

Student Elective

Traditional education would regard giving students the freedom to select language arts courses as the first step toward sheer calamity. Complete disaster would follow when no specific requirements are established. Not so with the Madison program. The majority of the students are sufficiently mature to select courses which would fulfill their educational interests and needs. English teachers and guidance counselors confer, in groups and individually, with students concerning their language arts course selections. The student then makes the final decision. Since class changes are strongly discouraged, the students must be well aware of course content and teacher expectations prior to the final registration. Consultations with students must be an integral part of any successful elective program.

Proving they are capable of making mature decisions, students tend to use their personal goals as guidelines for class selection. Therefore, any particular ability grouping becomes unnecessary and irrelevent. Students group themselves according to their interests. For example, if a student has a special interest in drama, he has the opportunity to receive a diverse background in drama by electing any of the eleven drama courses. The interest grouping has proved to be superior to other methods in that it further enables the student to establish his own program of studies.

Teachers, as well as students, suggest new courses. One course, Senior Study Seminar, is an example of the cooperative efforts of teachers and students. College-bound seniors are unfamiliar with many of the aspects of college applications, entrance examinations, planning a program of studies, and actual college testing prior to entering college. Therefore, the seminar has been initiated to give Madison seniors a "head start" for college life. Students from the 1969-70 college prep. classes helped their English teacher, Mrs. Brenda Coe, develop the course.

Students recognize the added responsibility placed upon them by the elective courses. In addition to helping students develop a sense of responsibility, students commented that the new program better prepared a student for his future. Before, all students did the same things regardless of their needs. Students now make the final decisions regarding course selections and offerings.

Student Acceptance

Increased enrollment, positive attitudes, grade improvement, and additional courses indicate the success of the elective English program. Since standardized methods of evaluating the student-centered language arts curriculum were unavailable, students and teachers were given separate questionnaires and requested to evaluate their program. Students overwhelmingly voiced their support of the elective language arts courses. Eighty-seven percent of the students approved of the freedom of selecting various nineweek courses and of the multi-age grouping. Teachers enthusiastically endorsed the elective-type program.

Another indication of the acceptance of the program is evident by the enrollment of senior class members. Madison seniors are not required to take English and many were diligently avoiding it. Developing courses sufficiently attractive for seniors to elect English became an additional objective of the language arts department. During 1969-70, approximately thirty-four percent of the seniors were enrolled in the elective courses each quarter. This percentage increased to fifty-four for 1970-71. Previous enrollment in English IV, which has been discontinued, included only nineteen percent of the seniors. The local language arts enrollment, including the elective program plus journalism, speech, drama, and pre-college was approximately ninety-eight percent of the total school enrollment of twelve hundred twenty-one during 1969-70.

The student attitude change toward English, based on the elective program,

has resulted in fewer discipline problems. This improved atmosphere has fostered positive classroom attitudes which formerly were not evident in English classes. Students and teachers motivate each other! The result — better teaching and more learning. Involvement in classroom activities enables teachers and students to revitalize the learning process. They learn from each other and enjoy the experience. Naturally teachers believe that such a motivational learning situation would result in students' earning better grades. According to class records, grades for seventy-three percent of the students enrolled in the elective program during 1969-70 were equal to, or an improvement over, the previous year's average. This in itself is an indication of the student interest in the program.

Curricular Hang-Ups

Innovative programs that are successful are not without many complications that threaten implementation. The Madison High School English program is no exception. By far the most serious problem that eventually must be solved if elective nine-week courses are to be successful is the almost monumental task of scheduling. Many data processing centers, even those operated for educational purposes, hesitate or will not even attempt to schedule the elective nine-week courses. As a result, all of the students enrolled for English at Madison have been hand-scheduled four times a year since the program was initiated.

Schedule changes present a particular dilemma for the nine-week program. At Madison, the English schedule is built after the master schedule, thereby allowing the scheduling of English during any free period. Therefore, any course change which affects the student's various free periods further complicates the English scheduling.

Student evaluation, always a problem, is perhaps magnified in the Madison program. Day to day evaluation is not as critical as the step of transforming daily performance into a letter grade for an entire course. The grading problem is increased when nongraded courses of various degrees of difficulty are offered, but student progress is still reported to parents in traditional terms. Traditional terms are not acceptable when attempting to reflect the benefit that a student might receive from a course such as How To Study, Speed, or On The Job. The Madison staff is seeking an answer to the overall problem of evaluation. Solutions are not easily identified.

The high school English program at Madison has triggered reactions on behalf of students concerning elective and interest-oriented courses in other high school departments. Most generally mentioned is the social studies department, certainly an area that offers rich potential for a program based on students' interests, although other curricular areas are also possibilities. Kagan attests, "The test of a good curriculum is its ability to allow children to generate them."[3] Hopefully, the elective type interest-oriented program will be a working model of this philosophy.

The Madison High School English program certainly does not represent a final solution to improving the teaching of high school English. It does, however, illustrate the advantages that must be present for a successful program of studies in the future. To be successful, these programs must (1) be student-centered, (2) be of interest to students, (3) allow for individual differences, and (4) permit teachers to be a responsible force in the construction and implementation of such a project.

Editor's Note: Susan Taylor is Chairman of the English Department of Madison Senior High School and Howard Henderson is Curriculum Director of Madison Local Schools, Mansfield, Ohio.

[3]Ibid.